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on

March 6th and 13th and April 3rd, 1930

by

JOHN G. WILSON

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THE ASSOCIATED BOOKSELLERS OF GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND
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Daniel Macmillan (aetat. 28) in a letter to James MacLehose:

"We booksellers, if we are faithful to our task, are trying to destroy, and are helping to destroy, all kinds of confusion, and are aiding our Taskmaster to reduce the world into order, and beauty, and harmony. Bread we must have, and gain it by the sweat of our brow, or of our brain, and that is noble, because God-appointed. Yet that is not all. As truly as God is, we are his ministers, and help to minister to the wellbeing of the spirits of men. At the same time it is our duty to manage our affairs wisely, keep our minds easy, and not trade beyond our means."

Francis Bacon:

"I hold every man a debtor to his profession, from the which, as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavour themselves, by way of amends, to be a help and ornament thereunto."

FOREWORD

THIS little volume contains the actual notes for the three lectures given by me at the Day Training College by arrangement with the London County Council, (March 6th and 13th and April 3rd, 1930).

Each lecture occupied an hour, followed by questions and comments for another hour.

I hope my good friend Mr. W. McKean Cant will expand his two lectures on Salesmanship for a similar volume.

The material, after the first evening, was put together with the idea of meeting the expressed wishes and criticism of those who took part in the discussions. All were jolly occasions, very enthusiastic, with an average attendance of nearly 150 pupils. It is a pity we cannot have a record of the discussions, they were so full of excellent points.

To the numerous friends made at those gatherings I would say that I learned much from them and was greatly encouraged by their courtesy and kindness.

My special thanks are due to those gentlemen who acted as chairmen: Mr. H. E. Alden, President of the Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland, Mr. H. L. Jackson and Mr. Charles Young.

The text here given follows the reports in eight issues of *The Publisher and Bookseller*, and Mr. Geoffrey Williams, its Editor, in persuading me to hand over my notes, is responsible for their appearance in that Journal and I am grateful to him for valuable assistance.

The Book Trade should be aware of the practical interest shown by the London County Council in the

education of our assistants. The lecture course at the Day Training College is only the latest expression of that interest which extends over several years. In Mr. J. B. Chapman, of the London County Council, the Booksellers have an excellent friend.

J. G. W.

I

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT—THE GROWTH OF THE IDEA OF CRAFT CLASSES

ABOUT eight years ago it was felt amongst education authorities that some definite steps ought to be taken in connection with vocational training while young people were still at school. The leaving age had been advanced, and boys were coming into business, certainly with more general education than formerly, but without any technical training for their life's work. As is usual with young people who had no definite employment to go to on leaving school, months and periods running sometimes into years were more or less wasted in an effort to find steady employment. Where periods of learnership or apprenticeship were entered upon, these young workers were of mature age by the time they had completed their engagements, and unless the chosen employment was one that suited the individual, it was an extremely difficult thing for the unsuitable candidate to begin at something that was quite new. There was also a very definite impression that a goodly proportion of those who entered such probationary periods of employment were not so apt in learning their job as was the case under the old school leaving age.

The London County Council therefore set about to make inquiries in the various trades regarding apprenticeship systems which had been in vogue throughout the country before the war. It so happened that their

inquiries coincided, in time, with the feeling in the Book Trade that something should be done for the better training of juniors if bookselling was to retain its prestige as one of the social influences in our national life. And it was out of this inquiry that the classes at The School of Printing and at The Kingsway Institute, in London, were started. The information gathered by the L.C.C. showed that the indentured apprentice in the Book Trade was a very rare thing indeed, and that outside of a few University towns and the principal bookshops in Scotland, booksellers were now drawing their learners from elementary and secondary schools, and that engagements were made for the most part for three to five years without any definite promise regarding future employment.

Such a state of things is unsatisfactory so far as the future of our trade is concerned. A mere shadow of an apprenticeship system is of no use whatsoever in a trade where accurate knowledge and careful training are essential. London employers had got away from the formal document and boys were engaged as learners, starting with rough and ready routine, cleaning, and message work, passing on to collecting or elementary office duties, and, if wanted, they became junior assistants. But unless the lad was a bright specimen, the tendency was that he was allowed to drift more or less, and had to make a position by filling a temporary post. There was no surety of employment. If after a few years of service in this haphazard way he found himself without work, he had difficulty in finding other than casual employment, or indeed might go into some other business. The wastefulness of this system, or lack of system, to both master and man is obvious, and might easily develop, as it actually did, into a condition which found the booksellers with insufficiently trained staffs.

Every master bookseller who has had occasion to advertise for assistants will support me in my contention that it is only within a very recent period that suitable assistants have responded, and that at the present moment the situation in this respect is still far from good.

It occurred to the L.C.C. that in addition to classes that would bring together for practical teaching the younger members of the trade (classes are already in existence not only in London but in several of the large cities throughout the country), lectures on the general condition and working of the trade would call attention to the urgent need for consistent training, so that we might have a steady flow of new and intelligent material to a trade which demands application, if not life-long service and devotion. Hence these lectures, which have for their immediate purpose the creation of an atmosphere for discussion on the business of bookselling.

I have hinted that the conditions under which bookselling is carried on to-day in this country are not quite so bad as they were. Let me now say that I believe a new spirit of hope is arising in our trade, a feeling that it is worth while to be a bookseller, not only because it happens to be a pleasant or fascinating affair, but because it may possibly produce returns of a financial sort enabling us to live in material comfort. There are signs of this change in our point of view, but we are not there just yet, and will get there only by facing the situation as it is, by challenging the conditions and demanding a satisfactory answer.

Whatever notions we may have about bookselling as a sphere of duty, admirable and pleasant, contributing to our intellectual enjoyment and the meeting of interesting people, with the interchange of ideas, and a comparison of values in literature, the constant reality to each of us

at some time or other is that bookselling shall contribute to our livelihood, and maintain us in physical well-being. The book trade of to-day is emerging from under a great shadow—a blight that weakened and almost destroyed it ; but we *are* emerging, and we see some hopeful light ahead. That blight was the discount system. We were drawn to comparative safety by the Net Book Agreement imposed by the publishers on the retail trade. If we have any sense we will hold on to this anchor of our trade, and refrain from all cheap and stupid efforts to weaken our hold. No need for me to parade the miseries caused by the madness that gave away our profits, and made us a laughing-stock in the business world. That belongs to the past, but should it come again, believe me, the honourable career of bookselling will be replaced by other means of book-distribution in which we shall have no share. We shall not be far wrong if we give a considerable place to the Net Book Agreement in this matter of improvement, but I should like to express the opinion that we owe a great deal to the better understanding that exists between the booksellers and the publishers, who have come to appreciate the booksellers' particular trading difficulties, and as a result, as I can see, desire to assist in making retail bookselling a source of steady and profitable employment.

I do not suggest that this better understanding is not also necessary from the publishers' point of view, because they must have satisfactory relations in order to get a better distribution ; but booksellers should recognise the goodwill, and work generously and in harmony with all efforts made to reach a wider book-buying public. Here, of course, we touch the most important aspect of modern bookselling. Since the war the reading public has grown a hundredfold. It is a public that in the main trusts its own opinion, and is inclined to a ready consider-

ation of contemporary authorship. I need not stop to illustrate this to you, because you are familiar with your own stocks, and the thousands of moderately cheap reprints in series which are in constant demand. I hold, however, this demand does prove that books have become a more general feature in the social life and, for the present, at any rate, form part of our every day conversation.

This idea of the book as a topic of immediate interest may be more evident to myself than to many of you, simply because I can recall the days when books made their appeal to a very limited class. But you can test the validity of the statement in a very simple way. *The Publisher and Bookseller* devotes each month a page to the best selling books in various parts of the country, and the similarity of titles in these lists, which are supplied independently, show that in the main the books that are selling, and may be called " popular," are receiving attention all over the country. Here, as I see it, we have the result of intelligent public opinion, and I am confident that so long as it exists in its present form, few, if any, really first rate books will escape recognition.

This attention given to certain books is not, as is sometimes thought, the result of reviewing, although reviewing does contribute to, and may sometimes initiate the demand. It is due more to a readiness in the public mind, and the timeliness of the book ; the real impetus to circulation coming from personal conversation rather than from printed recommendation.

The immediate and universal recommendation which comes from broadcasting may be another factor in unifying public opinion on the subject of new books.

But these are matters for discussion, and, however the effects may be achieved, there can be no doubt at

all that in outward appearance, if not altogether in inward grace, the bookshops of this country have altered almost beyond recognition. To-day we have a reasonably well-managed book trade, whose shops are found in all parts of these islands. There are not enough of them, according to publishers and others, but there can be no denying the general improvement in bright attractiveness of the stocks displayed. Go where you will, you will find better and larger stocks, which are definite evidence of that increased buying public and its interest in modern literature.

I believe too, from my own observation, that not only in equipment have we improved, but that the general " level stock," representing the best standard books as differentiated from current and popular books, is of a much better kind than it has been since the war. This " level stock " is something of which I shall have something to say at another time, but I trust I have you with me in believing that it is a most necessary feature of any bookshop that is endeavouring to meet the growing taste and demand for books.

I should say here that the size of the reading public is not measured by what is sold in bookshops. There are millions of cheap books sold quite outside the ordinary channels, and as, in the main, those books are good, we must believe that the huge public who buy and consume them—for *they do* read what they buy—is a potential area for our regular activities.

There is another fact to be kept in mind when viewing the classes of books sold to-day. Within a short generation the scope of a bookseller's work has expanded to Drama, Poetry, Art, and to books about nature and the countryside to an extent unknown a short while back. And I need not emphasise the steady growth in the more

constant sales of books for children. All these things indicate a bigger and more interested reading public, and present opportunities for business to the live bookseller.

I have mentioned the better feeling that exists between the publishers and booksellers, but an even more important symptom of betterment is that booksellers' own relations, one with the other, are on a much friendlier footing than they have been for the last fifty years. This must not be taken as a sign that we are driven together because of our troubles. It is not so, and for nearly ten years the records of the Associated Booksellers prove that with the all-round adoption of the Net Book Agreement, there has been the growth of a constructive habit in the working of the book trade. We now have the definite feeling that we are a power in the business of book distribution, and that we have a voice in the deliberations as to how the trade shall be carried on.

The progress of the idea of education, of which this meeting is one example, would be quite enough to show that the book trade to-day is taking itself seriously to make provision for its future. Far from such attitudes of mind being a sign of fear, they denote a businesslike confidence in carrying on the good work. It remains that this feeling shall grow in intensity so that, in the course of time, the ancient prejudices and suspicions will be wiped out, not only from amongst retailers, but as between them and the publishers.

One more thing about the trade as it is, and I ask you to pay special attention to this statement, because it may enter into our further considerations. I have noticed in going about the country, particularly in the larger towns, that the active bookseller is inclined to become a second-hand bookseller as well as a seller of new books. I will leave this observation for the present, with the remark

that I believe this to be one of the most cheering indications of advance, and my reason for saying so is that the tradition of bookselling in this country has never been that of the dealer in new books only.

II

SELL OLD BOOKS AS WELL AS NEW—KNOW THE PURELY BUSINESS SIDE—NEED OF PRELIMINARY TRAINING

I GO back to my remark about the tradition of British bookselling, that it concerned itself with old books as well as new. Indeed the older bookshops were traders in other things than the printed book; they sold materials for writing and for all sorts of bookmaking; they were Stationers, Bookbinders, and Print sellers. The firm with which I served my apprenticeship over forty years ago dealt not many years before in snuff and tobacco, and it was one of the best bookshops in the country. And perhaps for this personal reason I am a little impatient when I hear derisive remarks made about bookshops which carry other kinds of stock. Why did our colleagues of past days indulge in wares additional to their books? The answer is simply this, that it was an economic necessity if they were to trade at all. At the end of last century the only shops which successfully weathered the devastating hurricane of the discount system were those that carried composite stocks.

This brings us to the most vital of our considerations. On what basis can bookselling be carried on to-day as a profitable business? You will have gathered I am partial to tradition. My own training and experience have been almost entirely amongst modern and current books; to know them is quite a big enough job if it is to be done properly. As regards the economics of the business,

think of them as good housekeeping, or house-management – that is the meaning of the word. A bookshop is run on a business footing, is maintained for profit which should pay the expenses and compensate the owner.

As I am not skilled in the presentation of a business statement which is based on figures, let me begin by noting the fact that we work on a restricted or definite gross profit. This profit, while it is generally spoken of as thirty-three-and-one-third-per-cent., is whittled down, by reason of in-between purchases for stock and for occasional orders, to not more than twenty-eight per cent. of the turnover, and, I should say that the bookseller who can maintain his gross profit at this figure is a lucky person. On this basis, to produce a gross profit of £1,000, the bookseller must have a turnover of between £4,000 and £5,000, and under present-day conditions would probably carry a stock of about £1,000. If you consider what has to be paid out of the gross profit derived from such a business, you will find there is nothing left after the running costs have been cleared. I am assuming, of course, that even a comparatively small business of this kind is making an effort to deal with new books on an intelligent basis, and trying to cope with current general literature.

Bookselling differs from many other trades because book stock has to be carried all the time, and in a healthy business it tends to increase. With the extension of trading the amount owing by customers becomes larger—and both the extra stock and the book debts (until these are actually received in cash) are part of the locked-up capital, and the cost of this extra capital has to be paid out of the gross profit.

Now there is nothing wrong or alarming in this statement ; but it means that your profit, which is the remun-

eration of your labour, goes into the business, and cannot be drawn out, and unless you have other free money at hand, and are in a position to increase the capital invested in your business, you may be crippled in your necessary buying of new books. I think I can take it for granted there are few purely cash-on-the-nail businesses in the kind of shop we are thinking about at the moment. The thing to remember first and last is that the stocks on the shelves and the book debts are capital on which a dividend must be earned out of a gross profit the percentage of which does not alter, no matter what your distributing costs may be.

But, while the gross profit is definitely calculable and constant, your stocks depreciate and some of your book debts may prove bad. These almost inevitable things (and I could suggest more) are a charge, however small, to be met out of the gross profit of the business, which is already carrying as much as it can bear in general running costs. The enlargement of stock should, if possible, be prevented, as, even if it is balanced by the selling-off from time to time of the older portions at reduced prices —and this selling-off may be quite a reasonable and necessary operation in order to provide ready money for buying new books—loss in the capital value of the stock must be replaced, and is a sure way of eating into your definitely fixed gross profit. I shall have more to say about this depreciation when dealing with stocktaking. You may think I am overstressing this point, but, believe me, stock is the supreme matter in our business. Any bookseller who makes an honest effort with new books, whether in general literature, or along specialist lines, must inevitably make *some* bad stock, simply because no man has yet been born who can accurately forecast—remember we buy our books beforehand—the public demand. We are

caught every way; we under-buy and have to refuse orders, or submit to the short discount which is the nemesis of all insufficiently stocked bookshops. If some system could be devised by which we could strike a balance of buying, consistent with demand, which could be instantly supplied, we might even under present conditions be able to carry on at a profit, but so long as short discounts exist, the trade in new books alone is hardly worth the candle. I say hardly, because I believe the almost impossible is sometimes done by scrupulously careful buying, diligence in keeping accounts, and the prevention of bad debts; but surely a trade like ours might reasonably be made a safer affair.

From the point of view of the smaller bookseller these calculations based on the profit made upon his buying are a solemn affair, and it is not surprising if they sometimes make him as nearly hopeless as can be. Look at the question another way. Those heroic people, and they have my honest admiration, who start out to sell new books for a livelihood, have to face the figure represented by their running expenses. Whatever these expenses may be – and nowadays rents are not small – the turnover must reach at least five times that amount. The general figure for expenses revealed at a meeting of the London branch of the Associated Booksellers was twenty per cent. to twenty-two per cent. of the turnover. If the new business we are imagining swallows in expenses close on £1,000 per annum, five times that amount in new books is no easy figure to reach in turnover. New bookselling on its own is certainly not a project to entertain without much prayer and fasting.

Fortunately we are as a trade at the moment alive to the gravity of this situation, and the excellent Questionnaire published recently as a result of the very mixed

correspondence in *The Publisher and Bookseller* may give us accurate figures, telling us at what point in turnover of new books the danger limit is reached. The solution is certainly in an increased volume of sales. I shall be surprised if the minimum figure arrived at is less than £8,000 to £10,000, a figure surely beyond the capacity of most booksellers outside the large centres of population. Shops which are moderately successful to-day, and which can give a stocktaking figure not affected by the peak of Christmas trade, might invariably find their yearly turnover to be three times that stock figure, and to maintain healthy business the relation between these two figures must not be reduced. The conclusion I have reached in deliberating upon purely new bookselling is that under present conditions of trading we are driving the smaller bookseller into the position of being a side line merchant, thus diverting his interests from book distribution to the selling of other commodities from which he derives more profit.

You will note I am emphasising the smaller bookseller, for I believe he is, and always will be, an essential link in the chain of our trade. You may think I am old fashioned in holding that the individual owner is the best type of bookseller, the man who has to strive and realize his ideals, but without him we might have a mechanized and impersonal service. I may be quite out of date, but his absence would, to me, spell disaster. If he is to be prevented from becoming a general merchant, and saved to us as a colleague in good book distribution, I suggest that short discounts should be abolished, and that all purchasers should be given the profit that will restore faith in that part of the business which at present is not worth while.

I trust I have not filled you with gloom, but I have

purposely put before you the worst aspect, so that you may be stimulated to think furiously about it. Let me now say that most booksellers are wise enough to refrain from the experiment of selling new books only, adopting the sensible plan of dealing in commodities which can be offered side by side with books, and which give a larger margin of profit, with less chance of depreciation. In some shops, where new books seem to be a chief operation of the business, you will find that there is associated with the firm a Circulating Library, which saves the situation. But whenever I visit these establishments, I am painfully conscious of the rows of unsaleable books which are steadily depreciating in value, and I am often inclined to ask why a Second-hand Department is not added so that they may have a regular channel for the distribution of their depreciated stocks, and a better all-round representation of the whole world of books. But in saying this you will observe that I am coming round once more to the indisputable fact that new books in themselves, handled as both the publishers and booksellers would like to handle them, are not a paying proposition, and I can only repeat my extreme regret that it should be so. It is obvious that the complete and generous co-operation of the retailer is essential to the welfare of modern publishing, and I have sufficient faith in the publishers that should we, as retailers, be able to convince them of the position and that some alteration in present methods would be an all-round advantage, the necessary changes would be made. Once the trading facts are got together for the close consideration of both parties, we may see a happy solution to a problem which at the moment can hardly be creditable to the trade as a whole. The statement of that problem is simply this, that in order to deal successfully in current literature, it is necessary to

have a fairly large and composite business, including, say, a Circulating Library and Second-hand Department, or saleable commodities other than printed matter.

Approaching the topic of training and experience, you may reasonably ask me what is the use of grinding and slaving at a business which offers such poor prospects. Well, my answer will be straightforward, and it is that without willing and conscientious effort to grapple with your business, the book trade offers little of permanent attraction. Ask business men in other trades, and they will tell you the same thing, adding that the particular trades they belong to are even more difficult than yours.

But I do believe there is no business in the world in which can be used so much miscellaneous information and experience, provided, of course, it is brought into service at the right moment. As you know only too well, the questions popped at you may range to several millions, and the strange thing – and a thing worth pondering – is that every questioner imagines his query to be the most important in the world, and that failing to get a prompt answer, you must be an ignorant fellow. The dream of every young bookseller's life is to be able to answer every question and supply every book at once.

I am convinced that some preparatory training at school will be necessary if learners are to cope with not only the tremendous output of to-day, but with the mass of books which have been published in the past and are still in demand. The situation each year increases the need for greater alertness of memory and speedier sales, and the calls upon the assistants' leisure are overwhelming if pace is to be kept with even the simplest bibliographical details. You know a remark sometimes made innocently by customers, " I suppose you have read all these books," a staggering compliment, and the public must excuse us

if we do not always refuse to admit that it is correct. But the assistant would be a brave person indeed if he could read for his own pleasure more than two or three books each week, and it is just this struggle, to preserve a fair balance between a personal interest in literature and the practical carrying out of the work that wins his daily bread, that is the problem to be solved by any educational scheme in the interests of the juniors of our trade. But even with all the best training on the intellectual side, the discipline of routine, in which the daily tasks are carried out with accuracy, and the discipline of the duster, under which the junior handles the actual stock all the time, will still remain the absolute essentials of all training.

The business is so personal that it is really difficult to keep away from topics that concern one's relations with one's customers, in dealing with whom the true inwardness of training will be manifest. Simply stated, the first essential concerns the stock that is under your sway on the shelves of your establishment. That should be known intimately, and from such knowledge will radiate books related to the same subjects which you cannot perhaps afford to carry in the stock. As a matter of fact, every book, if it is of any use at all, is a sort of key or clue to short bibliographies on its subject; and linked with this is the absolute need for acquaintance with the use of reference books, so that the required information may be obtained accurately and with all speed. And the last, but perhaps the most important thing of all in this matter of everyday training, is the habit of keeping yourself abreast with the constant output of new works, an almost superhuman task.

To engage in this trade we must have due preparation in knowledge of our own literature, as well as the routine of the daily task. And in making these demands upon us

bookselling is just like every other kind of work. Character, integrity, and a close regard for the hard facts that control the satisfactory distribution of our particular commodity will enable us to use our practical imagination in making a livelihood.

III

NEED OF INCREASED SALES TO PUBLIC—STOCK THE PRIME FACTOR IN A BOOKSELLING BUSINESS—AFFECTS BOTH BOOKSELLER AND CUSTOMER—BOOKLOVERS—GOOD BOOKS—GOOD SELLERS

MANY who know me must have been somewhat bewildered when an optimist like myself belaboured you with remarks and statistics which pointed gloomily at The Business of Bookselling as something that was not only extremely difficult but definitely dangerous. If I created an atmosphere of gloom I wish to apologise, and I may have gone farther than I intended, but it was my deliberate intention to place before you the hard facts relating to our business, so that you might ponder them, and, if possible, come to a better understanding with your daily work. It would require many more evenings than are at our disposal to explore to our complete satisfaction the whole of our subject, and for that reason I thought it well to come at once to grips with the main question of the "worth-whileness" of bookselling, and to put before you the difficulties to be overcome.

My main contention was that to deal in new books as they come from the press in a way that would satisfy the publishers and our own desire to display the output for public consideration, was, in itself, a highly risky business, and I questioned if any bookshop which confined itself entirely to new books could be successful, simply because the capital involved and necessary depreciations would

outbalance all hope of profit. This unfortunate state of things is, however, not so bad as it looks when put in a broader fashion. For there are few booksellers, even amongst those who launch new businesses, who restrict themselves to current literature. But I tried to indicate that it was an unfortunate, and, perhaps, a slightly discreditable thing, that modern book distribution should be in a such a situation, calling for support from second-hand books, and the sales of commodities other than printed books. Just where the fault lies would be difficult to define without a very careful and detailed examination of the whole distributing machine. But there is such a fault, and the better relations that now exist between publishers and booksellers will not only find it, but set it right; and before long books will be displayed so as to serve the best interests of the publisher, bookseller and the public. I only wish the secret of how this is to be done were mine to tell you, but it will only be accomplished when the two sections of the trade come together on a basis of entire mutual understanding.

Our last talk revealed the only safe advance to be an increased turnover in books sold to the public; also that a movement to bring this about must be accompanied by better training and more experience on the part of those who engage in the business, while an accurate knowledge of the purely financial side of the trade was essential.

Now if you will grant me this, I will make the further statement that the stock of a bookshop is in every respect the touchstone of its success. How it is bought, how displayed, and by whom sold, will decide the shop's quality of service, and its value to the public. If, in addition, wise supervision and efficient control are exercised by the management, a book business will not go far wrong.

If you have ever ventured to stand on the floor of a bookshop other than your own, you must have felt how very personal your own trade was, even if you were inclined to criticize your colleague ; on a little reflection you would probably agree that his trade was just as personal in its way as your own, but it was in a different way. So, in speaking to you I must of necessity retail my own experience if my remarks are to be of value. In some ways you must know more than I do, and in listening to me will supply the deficiency out of your own experience. We all deal with the same commodity ; some sell more of one class of books than of others, and some booksellers are specialists. Your efforts to express in stock your ideas of business are immediately influenced by the response of your customers, and in a very real sense it is your customers who control your business.

The stock, then, affects the character of the bookseller and of the people who frequent the establishment. It is this constant action and reaction which makes up the fascination of the bookshop floor, and the drama that is always being performed there. In this way a bookseller gets the customers he deserves. He has to preserve his personal attitude to books without undue enthusiasm for his own opinion, and with proper regard for those of his clients. This passive and receptive attitude on our part will bring more knowledge than years of reading. It is easy to forget that the general reader who buys his books for recreation and occasional pleasure has no conception of the tremendous background of literature represented in the thousands upon thousands of volumes that can contribute to his well-being in this respect, and the test of our service to the public is in the provision of stock that offers enticement to one reader after another, no matter how often they may visit you. This has often seemed

something of a miracle to me, but think it out, and you will find it is the result of the practical outcome of your taste embodying itself upon your shelves ; and not altogether your own taste, but the garnered experience of customers who have become an organic part of your business. You have had, doubtless, as I have had, browsing customers who ask about a certain book they pick up from the shelves—" how do you ever sell copies of this work ? " The remark surprises, because you have found the said book sells quite regularly, and the discussion of that statement with the customer produces still another sale. The urge behind the selling of the book by you is, in fact, the sum of all your personal success in selling it before. I remember many years ago, this aspect of floor work came home to me as a very real thing. It occurred to me that I might make an experiment with a book which had given me the kind of enjoyment which impelled me to recommend it to other people. I sold 400 copies within a few months. The strange thing about this transaction was that I rarely came upon anyone who had read it before ; and still stranger is it to me to-day when I recommend that book, and find the same ignorance of its existence.

This experience, and it has occurred to me with many books, has been a source of much consolation and encouragement. Somehow it has lifted my horizons when I became depressed with the feeling that supplies of good books had gone round all the booklovers I knew. And after a few bouts of such low spirits, I became assured that the appeal of the best books could never be exhausted, and that readers who might buy and enjoy them would always be available. I suggest to you that this is one of the chief lessons a bookseller learns on the floor of his own shop.

The word " book-lover " has often cropped up in our discussions, and it happens to be a word that describes that person in only a general way. There are many kinds, and two other words describe practically the whole of the book-loving folk. It might be useful to make a homely definition. The bibliomaniac is one who has a love of books for their own sakes, for their paper, print, binding, and for their associations. He is a different person from the other whom we call a bibliophile, who loves his books for the literature that is in them. Each of us will know from experience people whom we can classify under these headings. Together they provide a working idea of the area covered by a bookshop's activities, and the place of our customers in that area. It is not for us to ask which is the better class from our point of view. Not one of us would hold violently to the opinion that a man must buy books only when he wants to read them. Were we to come to that sorry pass, we would sell many less books. The buyer who makes his collection for the pleasure of seeing them upon his shelves need not be a great reader to have our respect. He is fulfilling a useful purpose under Providence in maintaining the book trade, and in helping contemporary authorship ; and if he is a purchaser of old books, he is enabling us to make more than the usual profit. But this type of buyer is inclined to be erratic. Some rumour may reach him that by devoting attention to certain approved names among contemporaries he will be able to add considerably to the value of his possessions. And this stimulus, which is always in operation, is a good thing for us, because it confirms our friend in his bookbuying habits.

I have known people with this rather detached interest in books as possessions to acquire not only alertness and instincts in buying the right stuff, but who, having

accidentally read something of what they purchased, had come to enjoy their books as things that enriched their lives. It is a happy experience to be the person to recognise just that book which effects this change in the bibliomaniac, for it makes a customer into a life-long friend, and may be the means of transforming a collection of books, well purchased from every point of view, into a living and palpitating reality for the possessor. It is better to turn a customer in this particular direction than to allow him to develop into a mere speculator in book values, for in the latter case you have but a slender hold on to his allegiance to your shop, and may easily lose his custom if he finds it more profitable to trade elsewhere. But the book-lover proper, the man who cares for the stuff that is within the boards, while he may be a very careful buyer, is the type which nourishes the best instincts for good bookselling ; and when it happens, as we should try and make it happen, that both characters are combined in the same person, you have a customer who can be called " a regular," and one whom it is always a pleasure to meet.

There is too, that phrase " good books " which we are often inclined to use in a general way, without being able to define exactly what we mean. For instance, we say that we stock only the good books ; we try to sell only the good books. But how can we tell when we are selling the items that tumble every day into our shops from the publishers' warehouses, whether the books are really good or not ? I have thought about this a good deal, and do not know if I can communicate my impressions ; but there are in the main two ways which have decided the matter for me. The first is the book's material goodness ; that its saleability is not affected to any extent because it has remained on the shelves beyond a few months

and that as an item for the stocktaking sheet it does not require depreciation. It is constantly being sold, if only in single copies now and again, and has to be replaced. It is simply a good selling book, but if in the course of time it becomes a title which we naturally replace whenever we are making up what I have described to you as a level stock, I think we can call it a good book. The second consideration is perhaps a trifle more personal. Believing, as I have always done, that it is better to prevent bad stock by buying carefully, I have given wherever possible some attention to the claims of a work in general literature when it is ordered for the first time, and although you may think it almost impossible to be sure of one's judgment exercised at a moment's notice, it is, I believe, possible to acquire an instinct and to come, from a hurried examination, to a fairly reasonable decision on the merits or demerits of the wares that are offered on subscription.

You may say that we cannot all be " buyers " of books. That is true, but the same critical endeavour to get at a book's meaning will assist even a junior to a very valuable decision ; and I think that it is just that little personal effort made in order to understand a book for oneself that is so valuable in first-rate training. But in the matter of new books I assure you it is the exercise of this personal judgment which is handed over with the book to your customer which makes a personal friend and a constant visitor.

You will, I hope, realise that I am not declaiming *against* the sale of any class of book whatever. We all have our points of view according to the nature of our business, and it is well that it should be so, or the multitude of new books would never get a satisfactory innings. The popular sensational books, of which we sell large numbers, are good books, because they sell, and I have

heard most excellent members of the trade say that they found it necessary to sell such things in order to have an opportunity of keeping in stock other books which they themselves prefer. But I am sure none of us would say that our only duty was to sell such sensational literature because it was popular or profit-producing. Part of our function is surely to introduce, wherever possible, the better book, which from almost every point of view will last longer, and become more or less a part of the permanent body of our literature.

Good sellers are not necessarily first-rate books, but they are, with others, the commodity which we must carry on our shelves, without apology, because the public will buy them. It used to be said that the better a book was in a literary sense, the smaller was its circulation. This certainly cannot be true of book distribution to-day, for we rarely find a first-rate imaginative work, whether in romance or poetry, but it gets a good deal of attention, if only from the critics and reviewers. And because we know that such works are apt to get slow and restricted attention from the modern bookbuyer, it is surely our duty to put whatever force we can behind their introduction and possible sales. Again, to take the trouble over something that is first rate, and to succeed in selling it, is to make your contacts with people who are worth while cultivating as your clients. It is obvious that the sensational book, which we can keep on our shelves in fairly large numbers without much danger, sells itself, or is sold by display, and we can keep our souls alive otherwise by making every effort to introduce, at least now and again, books that might, without our introduction, be neglected.

IV

REFERENCE BOOKS—BOOKSHOP ROUTINE—FINE EDITIONS

WITHOUT reference books a bookshop would be lacking in tools for its efficient working. I propose to say a few words about them under the heading of " Routine." Be the assistant junior or senior, he must learn at the earliest possible moment that books of reference are his best friends and the chief prop of the business in which he finds himself. A general remark first: you should not inculcate in a junior the idea that *he is to rush* to the reference catalogue or other books immediately he is in doubt or difficulty. These are the records which help the reader or the bookseller to sources of accurate information. They are printed records ; but there are living records at hand in your colleagues and your master, and a junior should be taught that, as a first principle in gaining information, he should at once ask someone who may know better. It is really a question of getting knowledge in the quickest possible way, not because of your junior but on behalf of your customer, who meantime is waiting to get what he wants. Here is a bit of practical routine which carries with it success or failure, for promptitude is the first thing in the pleasing of your client.

Once the use of catalogues becomes second nature to us, we have a key to unlock most of our difficulties. But there will always be the need for verifying the presence or absence of the wanted book in the stock. And to this end every assistant should be " a good asker " ; persist-

ence in tracking down a book is often successful. To refuse a book for lack of making enquiries is an almost unforgivable sin.

Reference books, while they have come into being out of the needs of the trade, are not in themselves the end of bookselling. They should certainly be more to us than mere mechanical aids, for they are the source of much of our well-being. They are our reserves of memory, and we should cherish them accordingly, with proper respect, not with slavish dependence, but as indispensable auxiliaries. Like all servants, they will answer their purpose the better if handled well. Those of you who know the routine in this matter have a duty to your younger colleagues, and to those insufficiently trained, to render all the help you can, because a habit of reference is necessary to the development of a good bookseller.

Where you have a hazy or indefinite enquiry, it is a good rule, wherever practicable, to carry on the research work in the customer's presence, and let him help you. Put the books of reference on the table, and you will find that much of the anxiety that flusters your action will disappear, simply because you are both in the same fix. The advantage is with *you* in having the means of exploration. I have never known this method to fail in giving at least a temporary satisfaction to both parties ; not the least of its by-products being an increase in my own knowledge and, in many cases, the widening of the customer's conception of his enquiry.

You cannot expect me to enlarge on all aspects of bookshop routine, no matter how important they may be. A whole evening might be spent in going over the day's work from the opening of the doors.

Out of my own record, however, I want to say that there are two things I regret. One is that I never learned a

foreign language ; and the other, I was not taught how to read a letter. That may sound a little silly and too simple to mention, but wait a minute. Think of the awkward situations you have been in with your employers and your customers, and tell me if the most annoying have not been traceable to careless or casual reading of a letter order for books and the instructions for despatch. I can assure you that after years of observation in this matter, I believe there is more anxiety and annoyance over letter orders than over thousands of straightforward instructions given by word of mouth. Now *I* understand this, and believe the trouble is due to a habit of inattention, which, in my own case, has to be struggled against to this day. I can say that to some extent I have improved, and can now grasp the instructions as written down, but because I doubt myself, and am not in possession of a fixed habit in letter reading, I worry, and spend more time than is necessary over such matters. But however apt you may think yourself in attending to letter orders and instructions, one rule, never to be broken, should be adhered to. Before passing the letter to the file, read it once more, and satisfy yourself that everything has been carried through to the smallest detail. And should there be the slightest doubt, even if it does not concern your part in it, verify the point at once.

The further operation of accurate charging to customers is a no less important item of routine, and a source of worry to your ledger clerk. The clear setting down of a name and address, so that it cannot be mixed with another account, is one of the safest investments in the goodwill of your clients.

And while on the subject, may I mention quite a little point about writing down orders for books to be got in from publishers and wholesalers ? Remember

that someone else has to read your script, so make it clear. Remember also that unless your written order is for one book, and obviously for no other book, an incomplete description may lead the order clerk to get the wrong title, or edition, and so cause needless expense to your firm, and upset your customer. This bit of routine is an ordinary common-or-garden habit, as is the reading of letters, and should be drilled into every junior as indispensable to his make-up. The clear-cut, accurately written order, with all necessary particulars relating to the required item, is a joy to order clerks and wholesalers ; and the assistant with a habit of the kind is a jewel.

FINE EDITIONS

I see no reason to alter the remarks which I have made at some length on the subject of " Modern Limited Editions."* If anything, my expressed opinions have been bitten in by more recent experience, and I am convinced that the death knell of the limited edition will be sounded as soon as all the publishers of such books make up their minds to supply to its fullest extent the demand that is made for copies. This demand, you will remember I pointed out, was purely artificial, the booksellers asking for many more copies than they could actually sell, because they were afraid they would not get any at all, and the public joining in the mad rush after a commodity which they felt might bring them in a few shillings profit, if sold quickly enough. The recent experiences I refer to may seem incredible to you, but I came across a man who had ordered sixty copies of a book that I shall not name. It was more than five guineas in price, and intrinsically as a piece of book production was probably

* See *Publisher and Bookseller* April 11th, 1930

not worth more than one-third of the amount asked for it. Those sixty copies were ordered from as many booksellers, and naturally, with such a wide net, he got many more copies than he wanted for any purpose, and has still several copies which he would gladly sell at a loss. Another case was a friendly customer who meekly asked to return a book he had bought and paid for, because, being a limited edition, he had ordered it from six different booksellers and received every copy he had ordered ! To be quite frank, I do not believe real bookmen do this kind of thing, and I am suspicious, when I hear of it, that behind the confession is a rather mean practice of doing some other tradesman out of his job ; and it needs no prophet to foretell that if such things go on much longer, this particular form of trading is at an end. And what a sidelight the practice throws on the number of real booklovers there are ! I am sure, to say the least of it, there are just as many buyers of this sort who are out for a gamble as there are purchasers of the real stuff. You may ask, " How is it possible for one man to get up to, say, twenty copies of a book which is limited to, say, 200 copies?" The answer is quite easily given, because the purchaser not only writes to well-known firms, sometimes enclosing payment for the book beforehand, which is supposed to be an inducement, but he writes to small shops which do not do a regular trade in general literature, and from them he *does* get some of his copies. This method of procedure was admitted to be followed by a man whose word I can rely on. And publishers have made to you, as to me, the same excuse for shortage of supply, that a man ordering one copy can hardly be deprived of that one copy, whereas the man who orders five copies can be cut down to two copies.

A further complication has emerged in the open

competition of the American publishers in our own markets. There have been some gleeful fights recently for the bodies of individual authors among competing publishers, and the American with his golden wand can overcome most objections, provided the " insult " is big enough. Now if foreign publishers can buy books for the limited edition market and supply at one go the English and American collector, we come perilously near to the domination of this particular market from the outside. Up till now, comparatively small numbers of these books have come through to us because the price of a book set up and printed in the States is of necessity more when it reaches this country. The new development, of which we have evidence in the most recent book advertisements, shows that the American publisher is not only winning away our authors, but is actually printing the books in this country and exporting the sheets to America. This new aspect of the situation makes it possible to provide a book at a more nominal price because of the cheaper labour, and larger editions ; and though, as you know, a book to achieve copyright in the States must be set up and printed there, this copyright difficulty is removed at once by a trade or cheaper edition being set up in America for ordinary consumption. Just where this particular complication will lead us I have no opinion at the moment, but its existence is a threat, however slight, to the independence of British publishing.

Those of you who have any experience of prices at auction sales will know that within the last week or so there have been surprising drops in values of some private press books that have hitherto maintained good prices, and particularly in individual authors, who, during the past year went soaring to heights that have hardly been reached by some of the most distinguished men of letters

in our history. The lesson of this sudden return to what I call sanity in values should not be missed if you are at all interested, and it is this : that in current literature the intrinsic literary merits of a book are its real value, and it is unwise to gamble or to speculate in items that go to fancy prices where that high literary merit is assuredly not present. The present depression in the book trade is due to this cause more than any other, and, while I agree that it has been precipitated by the slump on American markets, I fear that it will be some months, and perhaps longer, before we get back to a normal trading condition. I think the object lesson is none the less one that we should take to heart.

We are not here as antiquarian booksellers, and therefore the subject of rarity and values is not one we need to discuss, but for you as dealers in modern books the only safe rule on which you can run your business is the one I have suggested, that a book must be good in itself to make it worth while selling at very much more than its published price, and the new bookseller who indulges too much in this kind of business lays himself open to the criticisms of his own clients ; criticisms which tend to undermine confidence and the steadiness of his trade.

V

BUYING—STOCK-KEEPING—DISPLAY

In my view, buying is the most responsible aspect of a bookseller's function ; it lies at the root of all his operations, and is the end to which all training should be guided, for on it depends the welfare of the business, and its ultimate success. Now, although I put such a high value on this topic, you will be disappointed if you expect that I shall unveil the whole mystery of it, or propound magical rules which will enable you to avoid mistakes. There are probably thousands of writers, and almost every general publisher, to say nothing of all the literary agents, who are searching at the present moment for a satisfactory recipe for the best seller. It is possible to analyse such a product, but the actual process of manufacture has so far eluded every searcher, and in our own interests as booksellers, the individual who discovers it should be shot at dawn.

I feel we must go on for some time making our mistakes about the best sellers that don't come off. There is no such thing as the perfect buyer, they are all as good as each other and better, or as bad as each other and worse. The mental attitude to successful buying is confidence. Whenever you begin to waver and doubt, the game is well-nigh lost, though I won't deny that even the stoutest heart may fail when asked to decide, mostly point blank, on 300 or 400 titles shown in one week. The human

brain cannot possibly keep up its freshness in face of such output, and, no matter how good the books may be, or how amiable and informative the publishers' representatives, the mere physical and mental strain of examination affects the orders any man is able to give.

It is an interesting fact in our statistics that during a period of less than twenty years, the number of books issued in one year has advanced one hundred per cent. I think that, while, because of the definitely larger profit assured by the net system, it is true there are many more individual shops, not necessarily entirely devoted to books, no one would be bold enough to say that the increase of real bookshops has been at all commensurate with the increase in output. If we think of output in mere terms of bulk, the difficulty of the buyer is yet more apparent, it being manifestly impossible for booksellers, with a restricted space, to show anything like an all round selection of the books they would like to sell.

At the beginning of a busy season, when you know you are already committed to several hundred books, not yet issued, in varying numbers, the appearance of an enthusiastic traveller from a large house laden with twenty titles for publication the following week is bound to fill you with dismay. No wonder the traveller is disappointed, but what can the bookseller do in view of his orders already placed, and his hazy knowledge of hundreds more, stretched out almost to the peal of the Christmas bells ? He must cut out some titles altogether, and risk the loss of special terms, or he must buy so carefully that the publisher is dissatisfied. In view of this constantly recurring and increasingly desperate state of things each year, I don't need to stress the point that there can be no golden road to success in buying new books. In my own case, I do what every bookseller does. When new books

are shewn, I find myself interested first of all in their format, and I never fail to salute a nicely turned out book ; there are so many bad ones. The author and subject then engage my attention, and if I don't happen to know anything about one or the other, as happens very often, I appeal to my friend the traveller. Now here let me say that booksellers ought to be more than grateful to those representatives who honestly fill their office by knowing something of the stuff they handle. Now the traveller tells me his idea of the book, and his contribution is mostly enlightening ; but at such short range, and with only a few minutes in which to decide, is it to be wondered at that, not really knowing how the book stands to its subject, I order a few only as trial ? It is no use denying it, but this sometimes happens with titles that become very popular, and on those occasions no one is more surprised than the publisher himself. But if I know the author, and something about his subject, then I am like my fellow booksellers again, I buy as many as I think I can sell.

How does one arrive at that decision ? In Fiction there is mostly some record, or recollection of a previous book, some knowledge of the actual writing on the part of the buyer, and, most important, there should, as often as possible, be a personal reference to some other assistant who may be able to give a lead in forming an opinion on the probable sales. In those rare cases, where one has actually read a made-up copy before publication, the personal judgment enters into the decision, but Fiction, especially where there are no records of previous books by the same author, must always remain a gamble. My definite rule when the author is unknown, and when a casual glance at the writing does not catch up my interest, is to buy sparingly, or not at all. If the book belongs to General Literature, much the same process is followed.

But it is so easy to make bad stock in single copies of books in General Literature that booksellers cannot be blamed if they decide not to risk putting anything on their shelves unless it bears some definite mark of quality. It is at this point that something of the mystery of buying comes into action. Certain books in General Literature, with apparently no special claim on your sympathy, compel you to stock them, and I must say that with books bought in that way I have never been really stuck.

One of my pet notions about the buyer in a bookshop is that he should be an assistant who is constantly in touch with the incomings and outgoings of customers. If the bookseller buys for himself, then he should make his assistants his very close confidants, and my reason for this belief is a very simple one. When I am asked how many we should take of what looks an important book, I invariably think straightaway of some of the customers who are likely to buy it ; that forms the nucleus for the order number. But because I am an active person on the bookshop floor, I also think of the sales that may be introduced by display and personal introduction. Provided your buyer has made up his mind that the book is a really good one, and also that you are fairly sure of your customers, then boldness in buying is the wise course. But remember, as I have said already, you must have courage with real conviction to back it up.

Wise buying consists not so much in filling the traveller's book with orders of magnitude, but in estimating the value of a new book as to its place in your " level stock." Now a " level stock " is simply that main portion of your collection which has a regular turnover, and which is constantly being replaced. Of necessity, it must be representative of the best and most enduring books that are in print ; at the least, it should represent fairly

completely the books that are in constant demand. You keep this stock because it sells, and because when your stocktaking comes round you know that the value of it shows little, or no depreciation. If one could only estimate the place of *all* new books on subscription with relation to a permanent stock, a bookseller's life would indeed be a happy one. That idea applied to the purchase of new books is as near a practical rule as I can give you, it is just the intelligent anticipation of a book's future that makes your ideal buyer, and it is the application of this sort of buying power to your stock that will give your establishment character, and bring you a solid reputation. And, if your experience at all tallies with mine, you will find, with this attitude to your stock, the endeavour to build your books into their places as parts of the house of knowledge helps the books and authors who are worthy of assistance.

STOCK-KEEPING

With stock our common enemy is dust, and as the operation of fighting it is so familiar, there is little need for much talk about it here. The general condition of stock, however, is too important a topic to pass over lightly. It may be true, as some bookmen assert, that they like their bookshops a little dull and musty ; but I've never known a purchaser who desired anything else than an absolutely clean copy of a particular book. The condition of stock is in every way a big factor in a shop's success. The habitual use of the duster, or brush if you like, is the finest training in the world for the assistant, and I cannot understand the objections some have to the operation, objections which take an extreme, and, to me, a rather comic form, when it is suggested

that charwomen might do the work just as they sweep the floor. Personally, I think the job a fascinating one, and I never take part in dusting and arranging, it is a twin transaction, without finding that I sell almost at once items from the stock I have handled.

It is the usual practice to allocate certain portions of stock to each assistant for this purpose, but it is wise every now and again to change over, so that each assistant may get to know more intimately the actual books, and where these changes are done in a good spirit, new ideas regarding classification and better methods of interior display can be pooled to the advantage of the firm.

In these days, when open access shelving is almost universal, the eye-line is a very important consideration. We are tempted because of the pressure of additional stock (whether by accumulation, or because of new books) to sky those items that are not selling in favour of other items that are brighter and more attractive. If now and again the favourite position is given to some of the older books, it will be found that the change of stock leads to additional sales. We must remember that customers are human, and if they see the same books all the time, their browsing loses some of its interest. One might call this the shuffling method, but it is valuable, not only because the customer finds the shelves of more varied interest, but because it brings under the notice of the assistant those items which, because they are a little out of sight, are also out of mind. The eyeline in bookselling display is a really vital matter.

Where the stock is thus sectionalized, the interest shown in the particular class of stock by the assistant will give character to the display, and I need not tell you how important this is. For, as I have already pointed out, books speak for themselves, and if neatly arranged

and kept in clean condition they are their own best salesmen.

According to inclination, a bookseller will decide whether he should label his sections so as to draw attention to them. This has its advantages, but also its dangers, for a label is just as apt to cancel out the interest of a browser as it is to attract him ; he may think he is not interested in books on that particular subject. For this, amongst other reasons, I am convinced that bookshop stock should not be too rigidly classified for display purposes. It is as often as not the unlikely book that your customer picks up. Over-crowding of these sections should be avoided, if at all possible, and unless duplication of copies is felt to be a selling emphasis, the duplicates should be kept in the reserve stock ; the important thing, of course, being that all your stock should be represented in the display open to customers ; otherwise books that are put away are apt to be forgotten, and will eat their heads off.

Reserve stock should be duplicate copies of the books on the display shelves, and such stock should be kept in order by being tied up, and properly inscribed. It helps the assistant in his work of keeping his section up-to-date and thoroughly representative if in the stock room the reserves are arranged on the plan of the shop's lay-out. This counsel, of course, is all right when dealing with well defined series of books, but it is the miscellaneous works in general literature which give us considerable trouble. In the old days it was no uncommon thing for booksellers with a fairly big turnover to carry all their stocks, even in the shop, in sections of publishers ; but I gather from recent inquiries and observations that this method is rarely followed at the present time. A stock room, however, might be the place where the publishers'

sections could be kept together, although I fancy in most businesses the method followed is a general alphabet under authors.

One of the chief reasons for recent changes in stock-keeping methods is that the life of a new book is so much shorter than it used to be.

We will be able later to discuss amongst ourselves variations in methods of stock-keeping, and perhaps you will be able to tell me something of a still more important aspect of the subject than has yet been referred to. I mean the method that should be adopted for the replenishing of books that should never be absent from our shelves.

I will pass from this topic with the remark that an absolute essential to every bookshop is a Stock Notebook, which should be hung in an accessible place for the immediate use of every assistant. According to the rule of the house, the name of every book refused, because it is out of stock, would be jotted down. Titles in demand, when copies were running low, would also be entered. In fact, every book of which almost the last copy had been sold would be registered for the information of the order clerk, or the governor. This is a matter which should be insisted upon in every bookshop that is trying to keep its stock on a proper level, and to provide books that are in public demand. It is a good rule, too, that all new books *as delivered from the publishers* should be displayed so that assistants might know what is coming *into* the shop.

DISPLAY

Of practical display as a means towards expansion of business I can tell you little you do not already know. But the seasonable opportunities, which can be indulged in by even the smallest shops, may be made bright and

attractive sections of your stock; Gardening Books, Travel Guide Books and Maps—are two of the topics in which we are all interested at the moment, and both of these have enough material which can be adapted for displays that will draw interested purchasers. The individual bookseller must make an effort even with these things to devise leads and pointers that will emphasise their presence. But the greatest essential to my mind in this connection is that they shall be located in some part of the establishment easy of access, and where people can stand freely without hustling or interruption.

The more successful display, no matter what books are selected, will embody the books that *may* be wanted, with a layout that enables the customer to make a personal choice free from undue solicitation.

I hesitate to enter upon the very vexed question of the best methods of dealing with one's windows. Wherever bookselling is criticised, the window is sure to come in for a good deal of hard words, particularly from authors, whose criticism we might discount a little because they would very much like to see piles of their own book behind the glass, and from publishers for very much the same reason, because they know that display is a vitally important matter in their success. There is also the modern shop-fitter-expert's criticism, which is apt to show a good deal of ignorance regarding the immense yearly output and its constantly changing make-up from day to day. Wild ideas from these experts about single book display may be effective now and again in one particular instance, but, on the whole, I suggest that it works against the best interests of booksellers who carry general stocks. There is nothing more attractive than a fully stocked window, provided the many coloured jackets are distributed with some feeling for harmony.

And even if I am a little unorthodox, I should like to give my vote for such window display as the best general method. Admitting that this form of advertisement is of immense value to the whole trade in books, we ought to meet new ideas for treatment as they come along, but it is wise to hold on to what you know to be a good method until you are persuaded that novelties are of practical service.

Of the numerous windows that fronted the shop in which I grew up there was only one which seemed to me to suffer any change when it was taken out, and the shelves re-stocked. That was, of course, the new book window. At that time there were no such things as book jackets, there were not even transparent flimsies, and books were delivered simply with the old printed sheets wrapped round the boards. The colours of the cloths were mainly dark. But this particular window I am speaking of was refreshed and relieved by spots of colour made by bound books, and by volumes open at the title page, displaying at the same time the illustrated frontispiece. The windows otherwise, while they were full of interesting books, most of them old books, were utilized as stock shelves, and I can remember that year after year in dusting and cleaning the books, I was aware that I was putting back the same books in the same places on the same shelves all the time.

So far as modern display is concerned, the book jacket has altered this entirely. It has come to stay as a protection to the book, and is of great selling assistance. But when it was first introduced many book-buyers could not bear to have their literature wrapped up in a printed or illustrated paper, and would tear the jackets off with indignation, and throw them on the floor before leaving the shop. The jacket has also, I think, worked another revolution

in bookshop display, and, so far as I have been able to observe recently, has almost abolished the individual price tickets, which were inserted at the top of the spine on every window book. It is a habit that may return, because publishers are beginning to keep the price of the book to the inside of the flap. However much the price on the back defaced the jacket, it certainly saved the bookseller a great deal of manual labour.

Whatever may be said for old-fashioned methods, I must admit that the bookshop window of to-day is everywhere a much more attractive feature of the shop. The tendency seems to be to get away from the close-up shelves, and to throw them back, providing space for special lay-out on the bottom of the window, and for additional side-shelving. Recently I have seen some most delightful windows entirely devoted to the 3s. 6d. pocket editions. What surprised me was that the excellence of the display was not in any way affected by the retaining of the jackets; in fact, the jackets themselves added splendid colour to the window, and enabled observers to identify any series in which they might be interested. Of recent topical displays, I need only mention the opportunity that has been taken in every part of the country of featuring books on Italian Art; these little exhibits must have been of tremendous value to the publishers represented, while at the same time they struck a note informing the public that the particular bookseller was not only interested in art, but in a London exhibition that had aroused world-wide attention.

The best made window display is immediately discounted if books are allowed to become dusty, and I am glad to say that in not one single instance during the last month (and I must have seen at least fifty bookshops) could I have said that the window should be taken out,

and re-stocked. All this, by the way, shows that there is a growing interest on the part of booksellers in their efforts to reach the public.

The one thing, however, that I regret not to have seen of late years is what I used to consider the most important aspect of window display. I refer to the little shelf that stood out just an inch or two from one of the main shelves, on which could be read the words " Newest Books." My recollection tells me that this was one of the most useful functions of a window, and that it contributed immensely to the interest of the book-buyer, bringing him inside to see some item, which, because it was new, and because he was interested, compelled his attention. That famous last resort to which we all turn in a moment of doubt, " the copy in the window," was at that time a very important affair.

VI

STOCKTAKING—APPROACH TO CUSTOMERS—CENSORSHIP

STOCKTAKING

THAT ominous word, Stocktaking, comes to us in the Spring ; it shoots up with the first green things, and arrives with the daffodils. How welcome it is you can each say for yourselves. I have heard there are those who do welcome it, but I must be an ordinary person, for I have heard it now during many seasons, and cannot shake off a feeling of dread as it comes round. I've wondered why this should be so ; why don't we greet this necessary bit of labour as we do the Christmas season or the summer holidays ? Not every one, of course, takes this sombre view ; orderly folk, who do everything to time and just so, arrange their stocktakings like a picnic, and really believe the members of the staff enjoy the operation. That's just what I've never been able to do ; and no matter how much I think of it beforehand, when the time comes there are difficulties and troubles which exasperate. But there are preparations we can make which not only lighten the disagreeable labour, but which can add to knowledge of our own business.

I judge that many firms take stock as at the close of the first quarter. It would seem a proper date, as by the end of March the stocks would be fairly low, as compared with the end of December. Every business suits its convenience and class of trade in this respect. It is

natural to make this calculation when stocks are at their lowest ; and the spring would seem as appropriate a time as any. My own stocktaking comes at the end of January, and I find that an awkward date for two reasons : the staff are not fully recovered from the strain of Christmas ; and a bare month does not give sufficient time to work off excessive stocks. But no matter the choice of date, the job has to be done. The preparations would include the selling out of as many books as possible, in fact the reduction of the stock, particularly of the " dud " stuff. Many wordy wars have raged round this topic, and will continue to rage until the day when a clearing house for unsold stock will be instituted by an enlightened book trade.

I have seen efforts being made towards reduction of stock, which, from any point of view, were a death-blow to profit on new book trading. I have already referred to the drain on net profits which too sudden selling off entails.

As a prelude to our task we are likely to reduce our buying, a sorrowful time for the publishers, but as we tell them, we will be in all the better form to spring forward when we know the worst.

I can imagine that there are almost as many ways of stocktaking as of the writing of tribal lays. No two booksellers will do it in exactly the same way, but however it is done, it must be done honestly if we are to know just how our business stands and what its possibilities are. The best course is for me to tell you how I do my own stocktaking, and, of course, you will believe me when I tell you I look upon it as not only the best way, but the simplest, and I *do* think it could be adapted to the smallest of book businesses. If in any way I do not make myself quite clear, I shall be most happy to draw up a

clearer working statement for any who may like to possess it.

Well, the first thing after the stock on the shelves has been made ready to be dealt with quickly, is to get out the stock sheets, which, for modern books, are of two sorts. Each sheet, measuring about twenty-two by twelve inches, has printed at the top the following headings, with spaces which have to be filled in : " Stock taken by . . . . " ; " Written down by . . . . " ; " Passed by . . . . " ; " Department . . . . " ; " Section . . . . " ; " Sheet No. . . . . " One sheet, for books which have been purchased during the financial year, is ruled in columns headed by figures beginning at 1s. and covering all published prices up to five guineas with six money columns at the right hand side. Under the price in each appropriate column are entered the numbers of copies in the stock. No detail of name, etc., but simply the figure, 1, 2, 20, and so on, representing the actual copies on hand. These are called " Net Book Columns," and every entry represents a book, or books, published or purchased for stock during the previous twelve months. When each column is totted and extended for values, the result is the total published price of the books on the sheet. From this amount there is taken thirty-three and one-third per cent., and the figure remaining is the stock figure, which is only further reduced by some small reserve amount which might average about one per cent. or less. The only deviation in this method as applied to new books is in the case of books published at and above three guineas, which are entered in detail, and extended as in the case of individual books in column form. This record is useful in many ways.

The other sheet has columns marked " Net Items," and in these columns may be placed prices ranging from one

shilling to the highest value at cost or under, of any book to which the entry may refer. This sheet has the same headings to be filled in at the top and is ruled with three sets of columns arranged as under, with a further column at the right hand side " for office use only."

No.	Title	@	Net Books	Net Items

These net items are the books which have been in for more than one year, and at the end of stocktaking every such book will bear on its flyleaf the actual figure, in cipher, which appears on the stock sheet. The reason for this is that stock you have held for a year has cost you at least five per cent., and it is only fair to yourself and to the stock that this depreciation should be shown. It is easy to calculate how much books that have been on the shelves for longer periods have cost you in house room, and that figure at least should be deducted. So that you may take from the shelves at any moment a book with two or three reduced markings, each one showing a slight further depreciation. But the point is, that every book is ready at a moment's notice to tell you exactly what its value is as stock.

I need not tell you that there are many books that need not worry you if you keep them for several years; and after all, no book that is reduced in its stock sheet figure need be sold for less than its published price, and very

many of those worthy ones can be sold for a great deal more. I hold that it is in this way the constant wear and tear of bookshop stock is provided for. But just in case the ordinary depreciations are not sufficient, when the net item columns are totted and extended, an extra ten per cent. is taken off the total figure, and this figure, again before it is finally entered on the balance sheet, is subject to a small reduction as reserve, amounting to somewhere in the region of three per cent. No exceptions are made to this general practice in the case of modern first editions, or of items of general stock, which have increased in value since their purchase. And here again a book of the kind may have been on the shelves for over a year, and be worth more than its issue price, less the charge for keeping the book. And the justice of this method can be illustrated in connection with these books in this way, that not all first editions improve in value, and in keeping to a constant stock figure, you are providing for such depreciation, and though a book may have increased in value you have not earned the profit on it until it is sold. There are, of course, certain " dud " lines which would be depreciated more rapidly, but these are exceptions. The treatment of second-hand books would follow very much the same course.

One occasionally hears of the stupid things that are said by booksellers to their customers; we, on the other hand, are so courteous that it is rare indeed to find in print the stupid things that are said by customers to their booksellers. But there are a few common remarks made at some time or other by practically every person who enters a bookshop as a layman. One is, " What do you do with the books you cannot sell ? " I venture to think that to this question there are few booksellers who give a direct answer. But it is a question which none

the less goes straight to the heart of the whole subject, the buying of book stock, with its associated duties of the preservation and keeping of the books, their classification, their display, their advertising, and their sales.

Few people realise that the bookseller carries on his own shoulders the whole responsibility for his heavy stocks. His capital is on the shelves, and it needs no business expert to recognise that of necessity there must be a great deal of " dud " stuff. The proper answer to the question, "What do you do with the books you cannot sell ? " would be, " We have no bad stock, because we do not buy it," a state of things not quite in accordance with facts.

The chief contributor to the "dud" class is that new book which we must have on show, but with which, as we are not gifted with second sight, we make a bloomer. This accumulation of dead stock is the ghost at every bookseller's feast. I am not concerned, at the moment, with the question of dealing with it, but I would say that if on careful scrutiny you decide that the stuff is absolutely worthless, you should get rid of it at any price.

APPROACH TO CUSTOMERS

In dealing with bookbuyers we are not always in that ecstatic condition of literary elation which so many people fondly imagine to be the true atmosphere of bookselling. For the most part we are ordinary tradesmen, dealing with ordinary people, and supplying a commodity, which in itself can be quite average in quality. And our ability to rise above the ordinary book and meet the better class, or peculiar buyer of expensive and special literature, depends entirely on how we manage this common routine on the bookshop floor. If only for their persuasive

emphasis on this point, these talks will not have been in vain if we learn the lesson.

The steady development of ordinary business, and I take it we are all more or less in ordinary business shops, is stimulated and maintained by this courteous and attentive approach to our customers. It is not only the immediate service we render by attending to a request, it is the whole impression we make on our customer's mind that brings him back and makes him a regular supporter.

The alertness with which we can register in our own minds the tastes and tendencies in the reading of our customers, so that the proper and not unsuitable item can be introduced from our side, is a sign that we are beginning to know our job, for it is just this buying in anticipation of demand which gives confidence to your client, and spreads in a natural way to other people news of the fact that you are efficient. This personal contact is in every way the most pleasant and satisfactory method of building up business, but with it must go the readiness to meet all new enquiries, whether from the casual passer-by who is attracted by our displays, or from strangers whose interest has been aroused by some form of our publicity ; for while preserving the personal warmth of the business done in the shop, we must be progressive in extending our markets and inducing fresh, and, if possible, new buyers. Activities to this end were indicated on a previous occasion, but as was pointed out then, the margin of a bookseller's profit does not permit of expensive advertising campaigns. In fact, the publicity and the getting of new business, outside the immediate shop trade, requires the most intelligent discrimination, backed by sufficient capital to carry the schemes through, whether they be large or small. To be progressive in this sense indicates that the bookseller has faith in the public,

and I assure you that if we give wise evidence of this trust, the public will rarely disappoint us ; and I would venture to say that without it progress is hardly possible.

I look upon the popular notion voiced by critics, and by societies which should know better, that the English people do not read or buy books, as an ignorant slander, and suggest that if the public were approached along the lines that they were excellent readers, who might read a little more and among better books, we would really stir up many more potential markets.

Recruits to the ranks of bookbuyers must come from amongst the young, and as we settle down in business I sometimes feel that we forget there are any such people about. In view of the fact that the book habit, which includes both reading and buying, has become almost an integral part of our system of education, and that scores of thousands of those prepared minds are launched on the world every year, the idea that the book trade is on the decline is preposterous. I fear that it is we ourselves who do not realise the possibilities of such markets. Contact with these youthful enthusiasts for book reading is the most refreshing experience we booksellers can have. We talk about getting new blood into the trade ; what we really want is to attract these crowds of young readers into our bookshops. No matter how clever we are, we get stodgy ; our stocks tend to repeat themselves in character, even when under our eyes new scientific conceptions are working a revolution in the social order. The real potential markets, then, are the markets where new ideas can be sold, such ideas as we find in the books of Jeans, Whitehead, Eddington, Haldane, Huxley, and Russell, and our progress will be marked according to the success with which we adapt ourselves to these changes in the intellectual outlook. To do this involves effort on our

part, and, maybe, a breaking away from habits in our reading, but the result will undoubtedly be of immense value, almost like a fresh start in life.

You will agree, I think, that the variegated pattern your own reading weaves in your mind is the background, or touchstone against, or by which you judge every individual book you examine. If, as I shall suggest later, you have read a few outstanding and thoroughly representative books in Drama, Poetry, History, and Fiction, and if the reading has been accompanied by pleasure, it is a true sign of assimilation. You will not be easily misled by trumpery or inferior works as they fall from the press ; you will have a personal standard, and every judgment taken will be a strengthening of your powers of selling. Just how far this knowing of your own mind should be used in persuading or dissuading in the matter of purchase is a question which must be solved by each one for himself or herself, for there is no rule that everyone can follow, unless it be the negative one, " Thou Shalt Not Thrust Thine Own Opinion Down Thy Neighbour's Throat." Your own knowledge in action will be guided by tact, and whereas on occasion it might seem fit to express a strong opinion with success, in another instance the voicing of the same opinion would not only destroy the sale, but leave your customer with an impression of your silliness in addition. I repeat there is no golden rule in this matter of recommendation, apart from the simple expression of your own enjoyment, or disapproval, and leaving the buyers to their own decisions.

I imagine you are growing interested at the moment because you know I am coming near the difficult problem of the bookseller's right to sell what he likes. I have hinted that a knowledge of books is essential if you are to be a judge of books, and I think you will grant me that

without this faculty of judgment it would be, to say the least of it, inadvisable for any bookseller to dictate to his clients. If you are a seller of books as though your commodity were ironmongery, this desire for the protection of the public, while it might do you credit amongst certain of your customers, would not prove that you were a good bookseller. To dictate you must not only know your material, but you must have experience of the people who buy, and as individuals we would not have the time, nor the strength, to read sufficiently among the new books to come to a personal decision. No experienced bookseller that I know is willing to take the responsibility of pronouncing upon the merits of *every* book. It is not so many years since the writings of George Eliot and the Brontës were forbidden in certain quarters, and I have known well-meaning booksellers who hesitated to sell Thomas Hardy because he was " suspect."

It is said that publishers are not at all disagreeably surprised, if they are not really pleased, when their books are banned by the circulating libraries, as records prove that such banning is the best and cheapest form of advertisement. Certainly many of the novels that have been banned in my time, particularly before the war, might easily be published to-day without the slightest objection. The fact is that public opinion is always changing in regard to what should or should not be permitted in print for general reading. There is no doubt that since the Great War (whether because our troops learned to swear terribly in Flanders like their ancestors, or from the general decay of morals caused by that tremendous cataclysm) the standard of decency in writing has fallen several points. Most of our modern novels which deal with sex questions would have been considered extremely daring twenty years ago. One cannot, therefore, lay down hard

and fast rules on the subject. All that can be done is to trust to the reviewers, libraries, and booksellers to exercise a certain care. I have never seen much objection to a circulating library refusing to stock specified books, because of their danger to public morals. A circulating library naturally does not wish to render itself liable to lose its sound family subscribers ; and the paterfamilias, old style, is apt to get extremely hot under the collar if he finds his daughter bringing home books that he considers should be banned. A bookseller, on the other hand, if he is in a really big way, has to stock most of the books that are talked about ; all he can do, it seems to me, is to guard against any buyer procuring such books under a misapprehension. He should indicate to inquirers that certain works are definitely unpleasant.

No ! On the whole I do not think we want a censor, or that books should be placed upon a forbidden index, and, generally speaking, I think the less the police interfere in such matters the better. Let it be left to the publishers, reviewers, booksellers, and the opinion of the public.

No matter how we may disagree on this subject, and the points of view will differ in every case according to our experience with the public, there is no sentiment which any one of you could express that would not find a hearty welcome from myself, provided that sentiment has been carefully arrived at and is based upon such experience. There are many books which no bookseller would dream of presenting for sale, and there are some books of which he would be ashamed if they happened to be on his shelves. I know of others which I would not, on any account, obtain even to order, but in making this refusal I am standing by my own personal opinion, and am not involving any of my trade colleagues. If

you are to function as a bookseller you must sell, within reason, the books asked for, and your success will be measured by the way you anticipate the demand by having the books in stock. You can reasonably be expected to give general advice, but you are not entitled to perform the duties of censorship.

It is well to remember that censorship is not altogether a matter of interference from without. In its wider aspect it is an effort to force your own opinion on someone else, or to deny the right of other people to *their* opinion of the book under consideration. It is wrong, too, once we have adopted a reasonable attitude, to think we are proved wrong because the book as a selling article has been successful. My own experience in such matters is that gradually the opinion so formed has been proved to be quite tenable. This particular problem is a problem of your own personal opinion, and your right to it, and while it is one of the anchors of safety that you must never let go, you must always endeavour to preserve the proper relation between your own personal opinion and your function as tradesman.

VII

PERSONAL READING

On the question of personal reading I have no intention of advising or telling you *what* to do. I am trying to give an idea of what I did myself. Reading is a very individual affair; one would almost like to keep the actual details of it a secret until the book is finished. And this is not at all a bad thing to do, because the mind does like to think over its affairs in secret, and the reader who is too apt with opinions and advice about books before these have been properly considered is a danger, just as the person who pronounces on any subject before hearing the pros and cons may be a nuisance in debate, because he may change his mind and tangle up the discussion. Indeed, I incline to discount hurried judgment on books, whether given by word of mouth or in printed review form; when notices of the same book differ as much as black differs from white, it is certain that some of them have been set down without consideration. Some of this may be due to ill-paid work, and the need for haste on the reviewer's part, and, of course, the almost kaleidoscopic variety of opinion may result from definite difference in point of view; but it is a fine and an amusing experience to compare your own feelings about a book you have read with the treatment it gets from reviewers. Allowing for every possible divergence in taste, one is suspicious that in some cases the book has never been read, and that the notice is nothing more than a topical paragraph written

round the book. If you have tried to jot down your impressions after reading, you will, I think, agree that it is not an easy thing to do ; but it is comparatively easy to generalize and avoid coming to grips with the book itself. And it is just this coming to grips with books that matters to us.

My collision with books must have been very early, for, strange to say, the first title I can remember is *Don Quixote*, and this must have been read aloud at home when I was hardly six years of age. It is a book I cannot pick up to-day without evoking pictures of my own people that will come in no other way. In the same way, the rugged prose of Carlyle, and the sombre music of Tennyson, were memory sounds to me before I knew how to read for myself. I often wonder if this background of sound, apart from meaning, did not go to make up whatever taste in books I have since possessed. Perhaps more than any other contribution to the formation of taste was the regular Bible reading, which, year in and year out, was engaged in by all members of the family, verse about. I fear it is a practice rarely followed to-day, and I am not complaining that it has passed, for other things may have taken its place ; but I cannot conceive of a better procession of words, or a richer background of images. Of reading at school, apart from the ordinary school books of the day, I was quite innocent. It was not until I had become a bookseller, just turned thirteen years of age, that I began to read on my own, and, strange as it may seem, the first books I read were the novels of the time. As a message boy I had to deliver every night the books from the small circulating library attached to the shop, and the returned books were generally taken home, as the round was finished after closing time. They were novels in three volumes, and I must have

read many miles of printed paper before I got an inkling that I might be wasting time. This came about because I started attending evening classes in English and literature, very elementary, because I had little previous tuition. And then, one day, while on a collecting round, an assistant in a publishing office presented me with a second edition of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*, and at that moment I discovered there was something more than mere sound in literature—there was also imaginative sense. My first real book, however, was the *Essays of Charles Lamb*, which I can remember reading about the same time; I know that I did not understand much of what I read. It was an easy step to the sanity of Hazlitt, helped by R. L. Stevenson's enthusiasm for him, and to Stevenson himself, whose books I read and re-read until twenty years ago. And with Stevenson there was Kipling, for whom I had intense admiration. All this time, at the evening classes, I was gradually shaping in my mind some framework of the books in our literature, and was reading for study some Shakespeare plays and particularly Milton's *Lycidas*.

I almost forgive myself for having the outrageous feeling that I could read all the books that were presented by Stopford Brooke, in his marvellous primer, and however erroneous the idea was, I did set out to get some idea for myself of representative books which were the landmark in literary history. I can recall what seemed to me then the dullness of Richardson ; the coarseness of Fielding and Smollett ; the shapelessness of *Tristram Shandy*, the bigness of Thackeray, who had always been represented to me as the cynical foil of the optimistic Dickens ; and some of the early Scott's, which, I must confess, became a task rather than a pleasure. It was when I came to George Borrow and to Meredith that I felt the warmth and largeness

of modern books. You must not imagine that I read all the books of these writers ; I simply read in them, and in some of the representative writings of other authors, but what they conveyed to me was the knowledge that every great writer has his own manner of speech, and his own tone, which give character and identity to all the best work.

At those classes I had contracted what I look back upon as a very excellent habit, viz., the taking of notes and the making of extracts of such passages as appealed to me, a habit which I recommend to you ; for some of my most pleasant evenings, when I had a free evening, were spent in the copying out of short essays, or long extracts from the books of Stevenson and Walter Pater, which I could not afford to buy for myself.

When anthologies began to be popular, I sniffed, with others, at the idea of learning from snippets. Nothing could be more false ; and I look back to my occasional reading in complete volumes and in selections as the most fruitful beginnings of profitable study, and of useful knowledge. Remember that while lyrics and prose essays are but little things, they are complete in themselves, and are among the glories of our literature. You can abuse any form of writing by careless reading. Even the marvellous stores of wisdom and the sheer poetry of Shakespeare can be dallied with to no purpose ; but, used aright, the small and the great can become perpetual sources of delight, and a commentary on our growing experience of life. In this sense only are books a liberal education.

We have all struggled with text-books on English literature, and there are many good ones—Chambers, Brooke, Mair, and Lang among them. But in building up a mental chart of this tremendous field, let me suggest that it is a good plan to begin at the modern end, and with the authors you know something about—then work

back to the beginnings. It was many years before I managed, even with determined effort, to get beyond Milton in the text-books I read and to this day I feel a bit shaky on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here let me say that Strachey's *Landmarks in French Literature* is one of the most charming short volumes I have ever read, and I confess that I cannot read a French author save in translation.

I was fortunate, of course, in beginning my business career so very young, and in having a natural bent towards books. But the habits acquired then have persisted with me to this day, and the critical essayists whom I love, including Ruskin, Arnold, Froude, Pater and Morley, provided an equipment which has been of first-rate assistance in everything I have done.

I have not told you all this with the idea that you in your turn are to read the books I read. That would be a stupid thing to attempt, because each generation must approach literature for itself, and in its own way. My purpose has been twofold ; the first to try and impress you with my belief that your personal reading holds a vitally important place in the building-up process of your career as booksellers. Unless the study of the material in which you deal assumes importance to your own mind, in that you must learn what it is all about, you will find yourself at sixes and sevens in dealing with the public. This means that you must have some reasonably close contact with the representative books of your own immediate time, and that you must learn at least one lesson with regard to it, that fiction is by no means its most important part. You can verify this easily by looking at your own stocks, and calculating the proportion of fiction to other classes of books, and by making a similar calculation as to the kinds of books you sell. My other

idea in parading rather egotistically part of my own history was to assure you that you are not complete in any sense for your work unless you read back to the books of the past. Nothing that has been done to-day but had its models and inspirations aforetime. On this topic you need little instruction from me, because your daily experience with a variety of customers and their wants tells you of the very wide area covered by the modern reader. But when you feel over-doped with what are called " marvellous " detective and sensational yarns of to-day, go back to Wilkie Collins and you'll find him the master of them all. It is only a hint, but you may apply the practice to every class of modern book.

This whole question of reading touches so many other problems which we have. It includes, as I have indicated, not only the avalanche of new books which come to us, most of which we can taste or smell by a hasty glance at reviews, but also the related difficulty of remembering titles we have never seen or handled. That group in itself is enough to daunt the bravest of us.

Some of you say, " Well, what of it—why be anxious to learn about books that are here to-day and gone for good to-morrow ; the old books that have stood the test of time are what we should give room in our minds for ; the good books, and not the bad." Yes, all that is true enough ; and yet there is an element of shirking in this attitude. While the " new " bookseller may be foolish in attempting to memorize and assemble all the output, he can keep an open mind as to what is best. Heaven knows, it is a mighty difficult job, and can be done only in a half-exact way, spotting a good book here and missing another good book there ; finding his judgment unsupported by his clients, and being caught out by unexpected demand. But all this uncertainty which will be eternally

associated with bookselling, so long as present distribution methods obtain, is the joy of the bookseller who loves his job.

It is not that we are bound to waste time on useless stuff, but that in the effort we are strengthening our judgments in grappling with the mass ; that we avoid infatuations which tend to date horribly, and keep our minds freshly responsive to first-rate and worthy stuff.

VIII

THE FUTURE OF BOOKSELLING—THE NET BOOK AGREEMENT—A CLEARING HOUSE—ON SALE OR RETURN—FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

It is a proverbial saying that we see what we look for, and any views on the future of bookselling must necessarily be coloured by the temperament of the individual. It would be easy to be fantastic and funny in our forecasts, because there is nothing more sure than that the present methods of distribution will suffer considerable change in the near future. The only thing we can be certain of, however, is that in making our guesses we must consider very frankly the present situation and its immediate past. We do not need to go back very far to find the retail trade in a condition of absolute despair and disorder. Less than twenty-five years ago the *Times* newspaper described the Net Book Agreement as an arrogant decree issued by the publishers for the purpose of maintaining unfair prices, and the same newspaper challenged the movement towards the Net System by opening up an organisation which would supply books at whatever prices *they* cared, in opposition to any definite ruling. All this has changed to-day. There may be slumbering fires in connection with the Net Book Agreement, but we hear little in opposition to it now. It wrought a wonderful change in the retail bookselling, which, as a business, had become derelict and profitless, and after some twelve years of all-round application to newly published works, is only

now consolidating our position as business men, so that we can go forward along constructive lines. I cannot imagine any publisher wishing to abolish the Net Book Agreement, and I have only met one who advocated such a step, and he was a Scot; for the Agreement is not only the safeguard of the bookseller, but also an assurance to the publisher that his accounts can be paid, because the margin of profit has been made a reasonable one. If booksellers themselves, by fair means or foul, attempt to break down this Agreement, which makes our trade a worthy one for heroes to work in, they will show great want of business imagination, if indeed they do not prove themselves unworthy of their calling. And for myself, I hope that instead of being tinkered at and broken down, the Net Book Agreement will be made a still stronger document for the preservation of prices.

With the strengthening of the Net Book Agreement, there must, as I see it, come a better community of feeling and of interest between all sections of the trade. In fact, I cannot see any other possible development than that one day, not very far off, both publishers and booksellers will find that their best interests will be served, not in separate societies for the government of the trade, but in one inclusive society which will administer fairly all matters relating to the distribution of books. Already we have a Joint Advisory Committee, representative of both bodies, which discusses our interior economy for the consideration of the Publishers' Association. This is a great advance, even if it may sound a little one-sided. The good sense of the trade will see that while at present the decisions on vital matters must be come to by the party capable of enforcing them, there will gradually be given more consideration to the booksellers, who are assuredly more in immediate contact with the great

buying public. When this levelling up has taken place and the need for unity of command has been realised, we will have taken another step forward for our betterment.

It is usual to say that the British method of conducting business affairs is a haphazard one; that we muddle through somehow, and even without rigid organisation, we manage to accomplish just as much as other countries, who are content to undergo severe discipline. I suggest that that will *not* be so true in a few years' time, because as a country we have lost a great deal of our insularity in intellectual matters. We are, as I have already suggested, in danger of some sort of domination from America, and we may also have some very similar inroads made on our markets by Continental countries. So far as the Continent is concerned, *we* are certainly selling thousands upon thousands more volumes produced by our neighbours than we have done before, and the regulation of such things can only be taken in hand by a trade which is equipped with a thoroughly good business organisation. The tradition of "go as you please," while it brings to the front individuals of first-rate capacity, is all to the good in a national sense, but should international complications arise, all sections of the book trade will need to come together if they are to be saved at all.

I am not hinting that what we need is the making of regulations and the imposing of rules in the matter of trading so much as reorganisation for actual business purposes; the essential things we need in the development of our markets, and the extension of the buying public. We know perfectly well, even in our small way as traders, that haphazard and casual methods of dealing with any aspect of our business are never productive in quite the same way as a deliberate scheme of work put

into operation and tested out in an intelligent manner. What applies to a small business must apply, I hold, to the whole trade, and I claim that at the present moment there is a serious danger to the whole market in new books, because of its tremendous output turning back on itself, and because the reading public as it exists cannot absorb it. We know something of what happens in this respect in our experience of surplus library copies, which do a great deal to deaden the new stock once the book has been published for six months. We also know the effect of regular remaindering of books by any publishing house, that it tends to lessen our interest in the output of that firm, and so far as the public is concerned (and I include in that term the public libraries) their knowledge that recent books can be purchased at a fraction of the original price only a few months after publication, does not encourage them to buy on the new market in the retail shops. I may be over-stating this particular aspect of my case, but I believe a great deal of the surplus stock, which we christen "dud stock," and which annoys us so dreadfully at stocktaking, is due to some extent to this very thing, and as a trade it will one day soon require our close consideration.

Those of you who are publishers will be good enough to take my assurance that I am not hinting that publishers as a rule look upon their business in selling to booksellers as a mere filling up of their shelves with all sorts of books, whether these books suit the particular bookseller or not. I know publishers, and I believe they are anxious to prevent booksellers from over-stocking, and from tying up their capital in unsaleable stuff; but with so many firms and so many books it can hardly be avoided, because of the great uncertainty in the mind of the bookseller regarding what he can sell, and the natural desire of the

publisher to dispose of as many copies of his own books as is possible.

Now you will see where my present argument is leading us. All future organisation in our trade must have for its central idea the release of the bookseller's capital for the purchase of new books. It is no use damning the traders as incompetent and uninterested people, when any one with the slightest knowledge of business can enter any bookshop and see on the shelves hundreds of pounds worth of stock, which cannot possibly be sold, except at a considerable loss, and which, at the moment, represents the idle capital. The enterprise of the bookseller in buying that stock was commended by the publisher who sold it, and in failing to turn it into money, the bookseller did not prove himself incompetent so much as he proved that something is wrong with the method of present-day book distribution.

If, as I firmly believe, the good sense of publishers and booksellers combined will overcome this terrible obstruction to the better circulation of both money and books, we shall see at no distant date the setting up of a central distributing house in London, possibly with branches in larger cities, to provide a more economic treatment of daily orders and despatch ; a clearing house which would concentrate in one building the looking-out and despatch of *all* orders, with the consequent saving not only of time, in equality of deliveries so essential to the retailers, but of administrative expense on the part of the publishers, each of whom would have his share in the control of the institution. The bare statement of such a development may sound very utopian, but that it will come into being I have not the slightest doubt, and its working will effect marginal savings of expense, particularly to the provincial and smaller booksellers throughout the country ; it

would go far to make bookselling profitable and more definitely widespread in its local influence. This idea is for a despatch clearing house, and affects the material distribution of books to the trade. Another aspect of it might be described as an exchange clearing house, through which the surplus stocks of quite good books might be transferred from one bookseller to another as required. In every large centre this exchange system is operating in some form, however elementary, and if the experience gained by booksellers in this effort could be brought together, whether it is being done by the exchange of actual items as required, or the interchange of lists from which a selection can be made on one side or the other, I feel we would have a really good basis for some central working scheme. No bookshop can carry all the books, and a visit to any shop will convince you, as it has convinced me over and over again, that orders are passing from bookseller to publisher for books that are plentifully present throughout the country, and if such orders could be effected through a friendly retailer, balancing of stocks would be materially assisted and result in a more definite circulation of the books themselves. You will say at once that from the publisher's point of view this may not be quite fair, but think it out, and you will find that it is really in his best interests, and for two reasons. The first, that it leaves him in no doubt that the books he has already sold to the retail shops *have been* passed on to the public, and therefore his plans for reprinting can be made more definite ; and second, that it is releasing the tied up capital of the bookseller so that he may make further purchases of live and saleable stock.

But such an exchange clearing house could never relieve the bookseller of his prime duty to buy his stock with care. Should the idea ever gain ground that it could relieve

him of this first essential of a good business man, the clearing house itself would be swamped and become useless. It could help the careful buyer who had made a mistake, but could never save fools from their folly.

It would take too long to develop this particular topic, but it is one that I recommend to you as an idea for practical purposes as between yourselves, if only along the elementary lines in which it is being engaged to-day ; I suggest it is worth while developing into something of a national scheme.

I hesitate to discuss with you the question of "on sale" or "consignment" methods. The "on sale" system has never been an integral part of British bookselling, and I question if it has ever been thoroughly experimented with. I do not commend it, for my own experience in partial "on sale" methods has never been very satisfactory. It is a topic, however, that ought to be examined carefully, and I hope someone who knows the system as it operates in Continental countries will set out the scheme in a clear and understandable form for our information. It is obvious, however, that an " On Sale or Return " system, conducted in a businesslike way, would *always* have to give definite information to a publisher of the actual number of copies of any particular book that had been sold at any given moment. While I confess to a lack of knowledge on this point, it must be known to everyone here that a certain kind of "on sale" system is in actual operation amongst us, and that many firms, particularly the large ones, can persuade the publishers to lend their books for, as they put it, " display purposes." This must be done to the benefit of the bookselling firms, who are assured they will have no over-stock from their purchases, and is certainly not done at any loss of actual profit. I should not be surprised, indeed, if special

displays, of whatever size, do not carry an even better rate of profit than that given to ordinary bookshop purchases. This emphasis of display is, of course, one of the points we have already dealt with ; it is essential to a book's success, and therefore to the publisher of it ; so we may say that where it is felt that individual books will benefit by a widespread display, the " on sale " system actually exists in this country. Can it be extended to all books ? That is the question. It would mean that a considerable amount of *publishers'* capital would be invested in the distributing side of the book trade. For myself I must answer the question in the negative, if only because among the multitude of books a large proportion of them are not worthy of valuable display space. A selection would be necessary, and believing as I do in the independence of booksellers, I say that that selection must be done by each bookseller for himself in the exercise of his all-important function of buying the books which he knows he can distribute to the best advantage. A system, even if it were practicable, which allowed publishers to send all books " on sale or return," would destroy itself. I think I can see the partial display of books as chosen by the bookseller growing in favour with both sections of the trade, and, on the whole, I would prefer it to a rigid system which made all unsold books returnable.

The future of bookselling, therefore, depends on an increased number of intelligent men and women who will approach the bookshop as the sphere of their life's work through disciplined experience in routine, literature, and sound business training. Now while I am against the mere regulation of trade which does not also inject vitality into the working of that trade, I do feel that in the near future the governing body, thoroughly representa-

tive of all aspects of it, will require to decide who is to be a bookseller, and whether the casual and odd channels of distribution which at present are so many irritants to the regular retail trader are to be allowed to operate just when and how they please.

Don't imagine I want to make bookselling a guild or a closed profession—far from it; any Heaven-gifted person who feels he or she can sell books profitably and open up fresh areas of bookbuying, will always be cheered on by me. But I look upon my trade seriously enough, and know it well enough, to be certain that training is necessary for anyone who becomes a master bookseller. The publishers look all too easily upon applicants, and are willing to experiment with this or that enthusiast, whether an individual or a firm, who can pay their accounts; and some publishers are over-inclined to favourable dealing with such novices beyond their treatment of old and regular clients. We do want more and more first-rate booksellers who, knowing the difficulties of the craft but trained to its discipline, will go out to stimulate new markets. But we do want them trained from the ranks of practical booksellers, whose life work it is; men and women who are alive to the risks of their business, and who are prepared to face the risks with courage and overcome. In fact, I should like to see, as I believe we shall see perhaps a few years ahead, some definite qualifying training for status as a bookseller, whether as master or man.

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